

学校编码: 10384

分类号_____密级_____

学号: 12020071152642

UDC_____

厦门大学

硕士学位论文

Behind the Oblivion

A Study of Gender, Race and Culture in Zora Neale Hurston's
Their Eyes Were Watching God

遗忘的背后

——佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿的《他们眼望上苍》中的性属，种族，文化研究

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论文提交日期: 2010年4月

论文答辩时间: 2010年 月

学位授予日期: 2010年 月

答辩委员会主席: _____

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) is a pioneering figure in Harlem Renaissance as well as in the twentieth century. Being rebellious and unconventional in both her private life and literary career, Hurston didn't receive the acclaim she long deserved. Although she made a meteoric success as writer and public figure in the 1930s, she then faltered quickly. Her work went out of print and this most prolific of black female writers died penniless. Fortunately, she was discovered by Alice Walker in the 1970s. Since then her work has been hotly discussed and her achievements reevaluated. Zora Neale Hurston is today among the best known twentieth-century African American writers. She has been regarded as a "cardinal figure in the Afro-American canon, the feminist canon, and the canon of American fiction" (Gates, 1988: 180). At the same time, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston's masterpiece, has become a popular textbook, read on college campus and by a wide general audience.

The fluctuation of literary fame of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one dramatic chapter in African American Literary history. It was not widely recognized as an important achievement until long after Hurston died in 1960. The initial impression of this novel in Afro-American literary circles was that it was a seriously flawed text. This thesis tries to explore the reasons for the initial unpopularity of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by examining Hurston's positions in gender, racial and cultural issues. This thesis finds that creative ideas embodied in her work such as feminist awareness, racial health, and black cultural identity, are quite ahead of her time. As a black female writer, Hurston's aesthetic and ideological perspectives are different from those of other members of the literary community. Because critics at that time failed to understand her contemporary standings, the work had been misread for a long time. Fortunately, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, an unjustly neglected masterpiece, finally achieves "canon" status that it deserves.

My thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter One explores feminist awareness in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this novel, Hurston's feminist impulses are quite operative. The female protagonist, Janie, deconstructs the stereotyped black woman image. She struggles to escape the fetters of traditional marriage and the narrow social restrictions of her class and sex. She is one of the first black feminist characters in American literary tradition. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is also celebrated as a manifesto for feminism.

Chapter Two focuses on Hurston's position on racial issues. In an era when Afro-American literature was viewed by many black intellectuals as an occasion for direct fighting against white America's racism, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was faulted for lack of militancy and absence of social content by protest novel writers at her time. In fact, Hurston adopts an indirect way to outlet the protesting voice from black people. Her work, characterized by Alice Walker as a representative example of "racial health", is an authentic presentation of black people's life and mind. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston uses folkloric materials to tell stories of black people and to demonstrate the strength of African American people. Her affirmation of black value and life style, in essence, is another act of protest.

Chapter Three elaborates on Hurston's inheritance and advocacy of black culture. Realizing the identity crisis of African Americans, Hurston makes effort to construct black cultural identity. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston makes experiential thrust in conservation of Afro-American expressive traditions. Hurston's use of dialect is a conscious choice; her adoption of storytelling and her invention of free indirect speech is her unique contribution to African American literature. She is the forerunner in the presentation of African Americans' own voice. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* yields a clear self-definition of her characters as well as the whole Afro-American people.

The last part is conclusion, summarizing the entire thesis with a research finding that the initial accusation of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a

misjudgment. Behind its oblivion, the novel is rich in pioneering thoughts. This novel is now seen as the wellspring of a tradition that is carried on today in works by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and other young African American writers. Its influence on American literature is extensive and far-reaching. It is worthwhile to make more research on its revolutionary significance in American literary history.

Key Words: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Zora Neale Hurston; feminist awareness; racial health; black culture

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摘 要

佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿是美国哈莱姆文艺复兴时期，乃至二十世纪文学史上的一位先驱人物。无论是在个人生活上还是文学创作上，她都特立独行，反叛不羁。尽管在 19 世纪 30 年代，她堪称是名噪一时的作家和公众人物，但她很快就淡出了人们的视野，其作品也于随之遭受冷遇，多年无人问津。这位多产的黑人女作家死时竟穷苦潦倒，身无分文。值得庆幸的是，作家爱丽丝·沃克在 70 年代重新发现了她。从此她的作品得到了广泛的关注和讨论，而她的成就也得到了重新评估。在当今文坛，她被公认为二十世纪著名的非裔作家之一，是美国非裔文学、女性主义文学乃至整个美国文学中的重要人物（盖茨，1988：180）。她的代表作《他们眼望上苍》也在多年的沉寂之后一跃成为热门图书，走进了大学课堂，迎来了广大的读者。

《他们眼望上苍》的文学声誉所经历的起伏波澜是美国非裔文学历史中极具戏剧性的一章。小说在赫斯顿于 1960 年去世之后的相当长时间里都被认为是一部无足轻重的作品。在发表之初，美国非裔文学界甚至将它视为有严重缺陷的失败之作。本文从性属、种族、和黑人文化三方面进行研究，试图探寻小说在发表之初不受欢迎的原因。论文通过研究发现，作品中所反映出的女性意识、种族观念和对黑人传统文化的传承等思想都与当时的时代思潮相背，大大超出了传统观念的樊篱。作为黑人女性作家，赫斯顿在作品中表达的艺术和文化视角都与其它作家迥然不同。作品因其超越时代的先锋性而被长期误读，但最终得到后人认可，进入文学主流。

本文共分三章。

第一章研究作品中的女性意识。《他们眼望上苍》中萌动着赫斯顿的女性主义思想。女主人公珍妮解构了传统模式化的黑人妇女形象。她不断逃离男性控制，坚持争取话语权，确立了自己的独立地位，完成了自我实现，是黑人女性新形象的代表。《他们眼望上苍》也因此成为女性主义的典型文本。

第二章关注的是作品中的赫斯顿种族问题上的态度与立场。在当时，美国非

裔文学被大多数黑人知识分子视为直接反抗美国种族主义的战场。作品《他们眼望上苍》因缺乏斗争性和社会政治内容而被抗议小说作家批判。事实上，赫斯顿不过采取了一种间接隐晦的方式去发出黑人反抗的声音。爱丽丝·沃克把赫斯顿作品中的种族观念总结为“种族健康”理念，指出她的小说是对黑人生活和思想的真实再现。《他们眼望上苍》通过富有黑人文化底蕴的民间素材讲述非裔人民的故事，从而肯定了黑人的民族力量。赫斯顿对黑人价值和生活方式的肯定在本质上是反抗的另一种形式。

第三章阐述了作品中赫斯顿对黑人文化的继承和发扬。由于认识到了美国非裔个人的身份危机，赫斯顿致力于构建黑人文化的独立身份。在《他们眼望上苍》中，她尝试保留美国黑人的表达传统，有意使用黑人英语并采用讲故事的叙述模式，大胆开创自由间接引语，为美国非裔文学做出了杰出的贡献。赫斯顿是发出美国非裔人民自己的声音的先驱者。她在《他们眼望上苍》中给予了小说人物和整个美国非裔人民明确清晰的自我定义。

第四部分是结语。总结全文，得出结论：最初对赫斯顿的作品《他们眼望上苍》的指责是源于错误的理解。作品在沉寂的背后隐藏丰富的先锋精神。如今小说被视为美国非裔文学传统的源头，爱丽丝·沃克，托尼·莫里森，格洛丽亚·奈勒等作家都延续了这一传统。它对美国文学产生了广泛而深远的影响。小说在美国文学史上所具有的重要的革命意义是极具有研究价值的。

关键词：《他们眼望上苍》； 佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿； 女权主义意识； 种族健康； 黑人文化

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Introduction

0.1 Resurrection of Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston is considered one of the titans of twentieth-century African American literature. In 2002, Molefi Kete Asante listed Zora Neale Hurston on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans. Although Hurston was closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance and has influenced such writers as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, interest in her has only recently been revived after decades of neglect. As more biographies come out, her past years are found and readers are able to read her legendary story. Born to a poor family in rural Florida at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hurston triumphed over many obstacles to achieve a unique place in the list of great African American people as author, anthropologist, voodoo priestess, feminist and folklorist.

Zora Neale Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. She learned early to love the tales she heard told on the porch of Joe Clarke's store, "the heart and spring of the town," as well as the books she read in school (Hurston, 1942: 9). Her idyllic childhood ended when her mother died. She then left home and scrambled to support herself and to gain an education. After two decades' wandering, Hurston arrived in New York City during the first week of January 1925, with "\$1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope" (Hurston, 1942: 33).

She could not have arrived in New York at a more opportune time. For the Harlem Renaissance, the black literary and cultural movement of the 1920s, was already under way. The Harlem Renaissance (1900-1940), a flowering of literature is the high point in African American writing. It had its foundation in the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, influential editor of *The Crisis* from 1910 to 1934. Du Bois believed

that an educated black elite should lead blacks to liberation. He also believed that blacks could not achieve social equality by emulating white ideals, and that equality could only be achieved by teaching black racial pride with an emphasis on an African cultural heritage. Answering Du Bois's call, many black writers were flocking to New York, as Nathan Huggins put it, to "express their individual dark-skinned selves" (1971: 43).

Hurston's works celebrated blackness, and she became an enthusiastic contributor to the New Negro Renaissance literary movement. Proclaiming herself "the Queen of the Niggerati," Hurston published the short story *Spunk* in *Opportunity* in June 1925, and in Lock's landmark publication *The New Negro*. Between 1925 and 1933 Hurston saw several of her works published, including "John Redding" and the tale "Muttsy" and a play "the First One". In November 1926 "Sweat" was published in the single issue of Wallace Thurman's avant-garde magazine *Fire!!* Hurston quickly became a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

While creating short stories, in New York she found a benefactor who proffered a scholarship to Barnard College, where she began studying anthropology with Franz Boas, who pioneered this study in the United States. Hurston was then determined to pursue a career as a social scientist. Two years after arriving in New York and armed with a new understanding of her childhood world, she boarded a southbound train. Her first stop was Eatonville, where she began collecting folklore—the folktales, spirituals, sermons, work songs, blues, and children's game. This folk culture had always been disvalued and discarded by many New Negroes because it belonged to the grass roots. Hurston was against this tide, devoted to celebrating the art of "the Negro farthest down." She spent the next six years traveling in Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana, signing on at lumber camps and apprenticing herself to hoodoo doctors, in order to document the art created by "the unlettered Negro" who had "given the Negro's best contribution to American culture" (Hemenway: 1977: 205).

While conducting her research, Hurston put the raw materials into her writing. She published her first novel, *Jonah's Vine Gourd*, in 1934 and followed that with *Mules and Men*, her first collection of folk tales. Then came *Their Eyes Were*

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